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ABSTRACT

In 2001-02, the Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body conducted seven research projects examining Indigenous educational policies and strategies. Qualitative and quantitative methods included literature reviews; academic data collection; and interviews and focus groups with Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, parents, community members, and students in 82 schools and government agencies. A study examining English literacy found a significant achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, especially in rural areas. Poverty and rural location were two key risk factors for Indigenous students, followed by English language status and health issues. Competence in Standard Australian English was the highest priority for Indigenous education. There is a need to develop Indigenous use of digital technology. Systemic guidance, policy direction, and teacher education were confounded by high teacher and principal turnover rates. Uptake of languages other than English was patchy. A study of assessment practices found that school and classroom assessments were highly variable, tests discriminated against Indigenous students on the basis of culture and language, and authorities had not taken action to correct the problems. A study of preschooling experiences found that community involvement made programs locally relevant, some government schools needed upgrading, and teacher education regarding Indigenous children needed improvement. A study examining independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools found that such programs were culturally appropriate, attendance was regular, and community links were strong. However, policies and guidelines were not inclusive of Indigenous protocols and culture, the transition to primary schools was ad hoc, state funding arrangements were not effective, quality teachers were hard to find, and access to professional development was insufficient. Recommendations and implications are discussed. (Contains 32 references) (TD)

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CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS IN IMPLEMENTING CURRENT DIRECTIONS FOR INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

1. INTRODUCTION

In this symposium, it is intended to draw on key findings from seven research projects developed and outsourced by the Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body in 2001 and 2002; and, within the context of expressed views of Queensland's Indigenous communities and educators, as well as current Commonwealth and State policies and strategies, to examine the challenges and tensions for the planning and delivery of relevant school programs for Indigenous children and young people.

1.1 The Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body (QIECB)

The QIECB was established in July 2000 to provide advice to the State Minister for Education and the Commonwealth Minister responsible for Education concerning the implications for Queensland's Indigenous students and communities, of:

- national and state priorities and strategic directions;
- implementation of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP), 1989* and the *National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2000-2004*; and
- emergent issues at regional, state and national levels.

Membership comprises fourteen Indigenous Australians - representative of Queensland's government and non-government preschool and school systems, vocational and tertiary education sectors, regional Indigenous communities and the Queensland Teachers' Union – all of whom are appointed by the Queensland Minister for Education.

Indigenous education consultative groups were established in some states - including Queensland - and nationally as early as 1976; and marked the beginning of Indigenous input to education policies, strategies and their delivery within schools and education institutions. The work of the National Aboriginal Education Committee and Indigenous education consultative groups in states and territories also led to the development in 1989, by the Commonwealth government, of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy*, the first goal of which aims *To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational decision-making.*

Because states and territories are responsible constitutionally for the delivery of preschool and school programs, Indigenous education consultative bodies currently

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operate in all seven Australian states and the Australian Capital Territory. Each of these bodies maintains contact with Indigenous communities, educators, schools and other key stakeholders in order to provide advice on matters relating to the implementation of Commonwealth education policies and their respective State/Territory strategic directions.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 Recent Indigenous population and school enrolment data.

The *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, 2001* provides the following data.

- The 2001 Census of Population and Housing reported that a total of 410,003 or over 2.1% of Australians identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Queensland's Indigenous population - living in urban, rural and remote locations - represented 3.1% of the state's overall population.

- Of the reported Indigenous Australian population, 57.6% were aged 24 and under; and only 6.7% were aged 55 and over (non-Indigenous persons represented 34.0% and 22.0% respectively).

- The National Schools Statistics Collection reported 9,596 schools in Australia with 115,465 Indigenous students enrolled in 2001, representing 3.5% of total school enrolments. Of these, 68.4% (78,943) were enrolled in primary schools - twice as many as the 31.66% (36,522) enrolled in secondary schools. A majority of Indigenous students (87%) were enrolled in government education systems, compared with 68% of non-Indigenous students.

- Overall, the Indigenous population is younger than other Australians, with 12.9% children aged 0-4 years, double the non-Indigenous rate of 6.4%. Consequently, the profile of Indigenous students enrolled at different levels of schooling differs from that of non-Indigenous students.

- For example, 44% of Indigenous students are in Years 1-4, compared with 38% of non-Indigenous students. In Years 5-10, the proportions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are almost equal at 46% and 48% respectively. It should be noted, however, that almost 4% of primary and secondary Indigenous students are in ungraded classrooms and cannot be allocated into one of these levels.

- In Years 11-12, the proportion of Indigenous students enrolled falls to half that of non-Indigenous students, with 6% Indigenous students and 13% non-Indigenous students. In 2001, the apparent retention rate to Year 12 for Indigenous students who were in Year 10 in 1999 was 43.6%, compared with 76.2% for non-Indigenous students. (In Queensland, these rates were 59.1% and 80.6% respectively.)

However, it is acknowledged that the overall performance of Indigenous students – a legacy of schooling practices prior to the early 1990s - has improved significantly during the past ten years.

2.2 Education of Indigenous Australians – past practices and policies

Australia's population includes approximately 2.1% Indigenous people, comprising two distinct groups:

- Aborigines, who live in a range of remote, rural and urban locations on the Australian continent, Tasmania and nearby coastal islands; and
- Torres Strait Islanders, about a third of whom live on the islands located in the Torres Strait between the tip of North Queensland and Papua New Guinea and in Cape York, and the remainder in various locations on the mainland.

There is a diversity of both Aboriginal groups and Torres Strait Islander groups.

For Aborigines, formal English-style education began in the early stages of British settlement. Although education systems were created in each of the states of Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century, the colonial government assumed some responsibility for educating Aborigines by establishing a school for Aboriginal boys in 1814 expressly for the purpose of *'civilizing and Christianising Natives of the Port Jackson area'*. (Rowley, 1972). In this context, education was in English and used as a controlling mechanism through which Aboriginal people would conform to British social mores, thus providing an appropriate and basically literate labour force for the developing colonies. Within a short time, however, this school failed.

During the 'protectionist era' that began in the late nineteenth century, Aborigines in settled areas were relocated to reserves and missions, where schooling was delivered largely by unqualified, inexperienced teachers; conducted in inadequate and ill-equipped buildings; and offered programs to Aboriginal youth and adults which prepared them for ill-paid seasonal work. Aboriginal children were refused admission to the white school system, and in many instances received absolutely no education at all. (McConnochie, 1982:22)

Subsequently new legislation was introduced, concerned with reserves becoming an institution for Aborigines until they were suitable for assimilation into British-Australian society. 'Freedom' was to be permitted only at a price - the shift to the philosophy of assimilation was coupled with education designed *...to train Aboriginals in the skills essential to their assimilation into the workforce...and...to bring about a change in attitudes and values among Aboriginals...* (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985:26)

The policy reflects a 'Brave New World' approach of class distinction, with Indigenes comprising a barely literate force of unskilled labourers. Although the proposed *'change in attitudes and values among Aborigines'* implies some recognition of existing values,

there is no evidence of attempts to explain or understand these values, or why they should be changed.

In the late 1950s a policy of assimilation was formally instituted in Queensland, following its adoption in other states (McConnochie, 1982). Schooling programs during this era tended to be premised on a belief that Aboriginal people suffered from a 'cultural deprivation' or 'deficit' which had the effect of impoverishing their linguistic and cognitive ability. Programs were thus introduced to provide intensive remedial teaching to compensate for this 'deficit'. (Unfortunately, the 'deficit model' is still in evidence today.)

In terms of formal government policies, an assimilationist discourse continued overtly until the early 1970s.

In the Torres Strait Islands, early education programs were introduced in the form of Christian teachings by members of the London Missionary Society, who conducted education programs in the islands after their initial landing on Erub (Darnley Island) on 1 July, 1871. There was one major difference, however: the language of tuition was not English. Because of several major languages evident in the Torres Strait Islands, the Bible was translated into a pidgin English. From widespread use by several generations, pidgin developed into Torres Strait Creole now in use. Further, because the restrictive laws imposed on Aboriginal groups in mainland Australia were not enforced in the Torres Strait (with the exception of Waiben [Thursday Island]) until well into the twentieth century, many traditional customs, languages, and major aspects of Torres Strait lifestyles, have been maintained. (Tripcony, 2002.)

A coordinated 'mainstream' approach to Indigenous education was introduced, finally, with the relatively recent (1990) implementation of a national policy, with specific goals, objectives and performance measures.

2.3 Current Commonwealth and Queensland directions for Indigenous education

The major policy and strategies that provide a coordinated national approach to Indigenous education are:

- The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, 1989*, the broad goals of which are to achieve improved access to, and participation in, education at all levels, as well as equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous students;
- *A National Strategy for the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, 1996-2002*, setting out eight priority areas in accordance with the goals of the national policy (above); and
- The *National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2000-2004.*

Overarching all schooling policies and strategies are the *National goals for schooling in the 21st century* determined by the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in 2000.

Within Queensland, the national directions have been contextualised in documents such as:

- *Partners for Success: A strategy for continuous improvement in educational and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Education Queensland* (2000);
- *Queensland State Education 2010: A future strategy* (2000); and
- Policies and/or strategies developed and implemented by non-government systems and schools.

Education-specific strategies currently being implemented by education providers require the establishment of partnerships with Indigenous communities, and collaborative planning to generally improve the literacy and numeracy competence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, to encourage their completion of twelve years of schooling or equivalent, and to guide them in acquiring the skills and knowledge for lifelong learning and active citizenship.

In addition, a whole-of-government approach to address the range of issues experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is being actioned through a Queensland Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ten Year Partnership.

3. THE RESEARCH PROJECTS

3.1 Overview

With knowledge of past practices, and within the context national and state directions for Indigenous education, the QIECB strategic plan 2000-2001 was developed, and a series of research projects designed to focus on:

- *Completion of twelve years of schooling, or its equivalent;*
- *Preschooling experiences;*
- *Teacher education;*
- *Standard Australian English and languages;*
- *Community capacity building; and*
- *Accountability (inclusive assessment, monitoring and reporting)*

Subsequently, in response to concerns expressed by Indigenous parents, community members and educators, an additional project designed to investigate *the sustainability (based on current operations) of independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools*, was undertaken.

The purpose of research projects was to examine relevant policies and strategies, as well as key issues and current practices of inclusivity, in schools and education systems and processes, of Indigenous learners from diverse geographic and community settings. This

approach was adopted to ensure balanced representation in the QIECB's advice to State and Commonwealth Ministers for Education.

Methodologies adopted were both qualitative and quantitative, and included literature reviews, data collection, interviews and focus group discussions with school staff; Indigenous teachers, administrators, education workers, parents/carers, community members, and students (where appropriate) in a total of 82 government and non-government preschools, schools, education institutions, education systems an authorities, and other relevant government agencies. From sites visited, researchers were required also to prepare case studies of good practice within their specific areas of research.

The research projects have been conducted at a time of heightened public awareness of inequities arising from past government and institutional policies and practices, and a time when both State and Commonwealth governments are seeking to redress these through redefined goals, objectives and strategies. Of these, education is a major focus; and must have multiple roles if the goals of equality and a reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians are to be achieved.

However, the cultural paradigm within which research was conducted – that is, the values and practices of education institutions - remain inherently 'mainstream' Australian, with the potential to empower some groups and marginalise others. While some awareness of this is evident among educators, there is still much work to be done in this area. It is hoped that through continued dialogue, negotiation and critical reflection, further strategies will be initiated to challenge and change present practices and inequalities.

3.2 Three projects - *Completion Year 12 or its equivalent; Community Capacity Building;* and ***Teacher Education*** are the subjects of separate papers within this symposium, and are therefore not included in this paper.

Key findings from the four remaining studies are reproduced below from respective reports. Full titles and authors of the reports are included with references listed at the end of this paper.

3.3 The *Standard Australian English and languages* project

The language background of Indigenous students can have a major impact on educational outcomes. While the majority of Indigenous people speak English as their only language at home (79.8%), a substantial proportion (12.1% or 49,764 people) speak an Indigenous language at home (ABS, 2002). In addition, it is important to note that some Indigenous people speak many languages, including several Indigenous languages/dialects and varying forms of English.

The current situation is one of overall poor English language and literacy competence and continued loss of Indigenous language proficiency among Indigenous children and students.

On English literacy, for example, the Year 3 Benchmark Test Data (2000) indicate that the percentage of Indigenous children reaching the normative benchmark in reading was 81%, or 11.6% below the state average. Although Queensland scores improved considerably from 1999 (from 85.8% to 92.6%), the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children increased marginally from 11.5% to11.6%. While it should be borne in mind that the Year 3 benchmark is a notional cut-off only, perhaps indicative of achievement of rudimentary functional decoding by the completion of Year 3 (with students in different states at different chronological ages), the data is telling. Generally speaking, Queensland Year 3 Indigenous children score better than their Northern Territory, Western Australian and South Australia counterparts, with lower exemption and absentee rates for point-in-time standardised testing. Yet the overall performance on this, and its Year 5 counterpart is not satisfactory. The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous achievement increases by 29.5% for the Year 5 benchmark, with 54.4% of Indigenous students reaching the benchmark. Thus, while the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous performance in Queensland is less than the national average gap at Year 3, it has worsened to fall below that average by Year 5.

Researchers report that by any measure viewed, overall performance by Indigenous students is poor – from 10 to 30% below non-Indigenous performance. The reasons, of course, are complex; and in part contingent on the cultural and linguistic limitations of assessment instruments, as demonstrated in the Accountability research report.

It should be noted, however, that key variables such as gender, SES status, location and Indigenous identification and language background intersect in complex ways. This makes the interpretation of Net and Test results for groups of Indigenous students a difficult task – certainly a more sophisticated one than the current provision of statutory authority data and Education Queensland database information allows.

As yet there has been no attempt to develop a comprehensive Queensland state Language and Literacy Policy for Indigenous students. This is in part a legacy of the past monocultural and monolingual, assimilationist tradition, and, of late, as been more a result of the lack until recent years of a template or approach to Indigenous language education.

Key findings

The main database related to the systematic performance patterns of students in Queensland focuses on information supplied through the Year 2 Diagnostic Net and the Years 3, 5 and 7 tests. Within Education Queensland, the results for each school contrasts the performances of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. On aspects of literacy measured in these instruments (ie. reading, viewing, writing and spelling), performance levels for rural and remote Indigenous students have been consistently much lower than both State averages and like-school averages for non-Indigenous students over many years.

F.1: On underachievement – Despite limitations of the current assessment instruments and everyday problems in schools with interpreting and using assessment data, the gaps

in Indigenous student achievement as indicated from mainstream measures of aspects of English literacy are significant, and require urgent action.

On the Year 2 Diagnostic Net, an urban Indigenous student is roughly 2 times more likely to be identified in phase A (ie. 'caught in the net') for reading and writing; with the ratio increasing to 3 or 4 times for rural and remote Indigenous students.

For the Years 3, 5 and 7 tests, rural and remote Indigenous students are roughly twice as likely to be below State averages on all four aspects of literacy measured that their urban Indigenous counterparts.

F.2: On who is at risk – The performance data suggests that poverty and rural location are the two key factors of 'at riskness' for Indigenous student achievement. This is linked closely with EFL/ESL and ESD status. Additionally, health issues – particularly those associated with hearing status – can be predictors of 'at riskness', especially for their impact on the development of oracy in the early years.

Based on consultations and interviews with Indigenous students, community members, school administrators and staff, researchers have analysed and categorised the varieties of English language spoken by groups of Indigenous students, eg. English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Second Dialect (ESD), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and English as a First Language (EF1). These varying forms of English language usage require different teaching approaches if competence in Standard Australian English is to be acquired. Accordingly, the research team has developed a Strategic Taxonomy of Types of Indigenous Student Speakers in Queensland.

While the literacy outcomes for Indigenous students are considerably lower than the whole student group, and the difference between genders has been indicated as significant in its own right, the demographic factor of rurality also bears significantly on outcomes. Detailed analysis and discussion of these (and other) factors form major components of the report on Accountability project.

F.3: On Standard Australian English literacy - There is a strong belief (shared across Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, philosophical perspectives, local and central administrators and educational systems) that the provision of powerful levels of competence with Standard Australian English in its written and spoken, print and digital forms, is of the highest priority for Indigenous education.

A strong consensus has emerged in the case studies of schools, interviews with Indigenous Elders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational leaders, and with systems stakeholders, and works across the political spectrum. It is at the heart of approaches such as the Cape York Strategy and the Commonwealth *What Works?* materials and national planning initiatives (McRae et al, 2000). The focus on improved Indigenous student access and achievement in English language and literacy has had bipartisan political support nationally, and is the object of statements of principle by major teacher unions and professional organisations.

F.4: On Indigenous multiliteracies – There is an urgent need for research and development activities to develop and generalise Indigenous ways of using digital

technology. Multiliteracies are an essential part of the right to cultural capital and power in new economic conditions.

Engagement with new technologies and world popular and media culture has become a focal part of communities' economic and cultural lives – and there are clear signs that mastering communications technologies and media culture will be important forms of value in new economies (New London Group, 1996; Alvermann, 2002). In their report, researchers suggest that it is a matter of 'which literacies, which practices, which skills and knowledges will count as "learning English"'.

F.5: Lack of systematic direction – While there are several examples of exemplary practice in classroom and whole-school blends of these strategies, the approaches, consistency and coherence of English language and literacy instruction in schools with significant Indigenous student populations are extremely variable; thus indicating the need for systemic guidance, policy direction and concentrated pre- and in-service teacher preparation across the system. These issues are confounded by high turnover rates for both teachers and principals, the presence of many inexperienced teachers, insufficient pre- and in-service training for both teachers and principals, and a lack of 'institutional memory' about what has been used and tried before and with what degrees of sustained success.

Problems associated with the implementation of these models in some contexts have been that often they have been adopted as the 'whole answer' and promoted as universally applicable to all Aboriginal students. These should not be discarded; rather, they need to be brought together in alignment with other features to develop whole-school programs.

Teachers and schools need to be able to make principled decisions, building whole-school plans, that mix and blend these (and other, more recent) approaches. A difficulty with this strategy, however, is that too few teachers and principals are fully familiar with the range of pedagogic options – and the wheel is being reinvented, or at times, just neglected.

F.6: On Indigenous ESL in Queensland – At present there is no systematic ESL policy in place that covers either migrant or Indigenous second language/dialect speakers. Relevant Commonwealth funds are allocated to schools and other agencies, but there appears to be no specific state-level mechanism for recognising and supporting Indigenous ESL/ESD speakers in systematic ways.

The adaptation of the migrant ESL Bandscales for use by Queensland teachers for the assessment of English proficiency among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is a welcome development; as is the advice received that further developments in Indigenous and non-Indigenous ESL policy are pending and imminent.

Researchers comment that *'Nonetheless the situation in the field is the result of almost two decades of unplanned and relatively uncoordinated language and literacy in Indigenous education...'*

F.7: Lack of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) data – Field studies indicate that the uptake of LOTE by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is extremely patchy.

Most schools with significant Indigenous student populations have exercised exemptions from LOTE requirements, some substituting community languages, and others complying minimally. There is little evidence that the teaching of European or Asian languages has had a major impact – positive or negative – on the acquisition of English language and literacy in these schools.

The issue of whether and how LOTE should be introduced to Indigenous bilingual and/or bi-dialectal speakers of Indigenous languages, Torres Strait Islander Creole and non-standard English to date has not received a rigorous analysis on linguistic, developmental and educational grounds. The current policy approach, which has consisted of mandated LOTE, with exemptions granted to community schools that cannot access trained LOTE teachers, needs review.

A principled judgement should be made about the educational value of LOTE for Indigenous students – for which students, for where and when? Not to be taken on face value, the simple claims that Indigenous students should receive LOTE for 'equity purposes', or because of the economic significance of LOTE, need to be carefully examined from a language development perspective.

At the same time, researchers recommend a strong and consistent respect for, support of and recognition of Indigenous languages and cultures. This is premised on several specific assumptions which in turn are partly based on the policy analysis undertaken of other states' and nations' experience. These are:

- That bilingual education is only effective in the presence of sufficient investment of fiscal and human resources such that: there are trained teachers of high levels of proficiency in both L1 and L2, and that there are clear domains for language use established in the classroom.

- That bilingualism and vernacular language retention can be effectively supported through strategies that emphasise separate or autonomous monolingualism – that is, separate linguistic domains, partitioned lessons and spaces for separate languages to be taught and learned. This avoids the phenomena of unstructured code-shifting in the classroom, prevalent in many of the schools site visited during the research study.

The alignment between the school and its community is important for language policies to succeed. Such an alignment includes a set of reciprocal understandings and partnerships around language and literacy:

- A supportive link between community 'language ideologies' (beliefs about the power and value of language and literacy) and efforts of the school; and

- A reciprocal link between teachers' understandings of the sociolinguistic patterns and functions within the community.

Positive elements to this research project are evident in case studies, which record a range of strategies developed by schools for building bridges with their local communities in order to achieve success in improving Indigenous students' literacy and language proficiency.

On the basis of their findings, researchers' recommendations in relation to Standard Australian English and languages are framed within the context of two key rights:

- *The Right to Cultural Capital*: that Indigenous children are entitled to equitable access and comparable outcomes in the attainment of English language proficiency and reading and writing competences and their affiliated knowledges and prates as forms of mainstream cultural capital requisite for access, mobility, status, power and influence in Australian society and economy (Luke, in press; Freebody & LoBianco, 2000; Cummins, 2000).

- *The Right to Your Own Languages*: that Indigenous children are entitled to access and fluency with languages, Creoles, non-standard dialects and accents for purposes of cultural identity and social relations, community membership and political power, and to participate in the complex local societies and economies of Indigenous communities (May, 2001; LoBianco 1987).

3.4 The *Accountability* project

The aim of this study was to investigate how current practices for testing, assessment, evaluation and reporting of student outcomes in Queensland schools address the distinctive educational needs, challenges and capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The report describes the contexts and current status of a broad range of assessment practices found in school – informal and formal, standardised and non-standardised. These include system-wide standardised testing, school-based diagnostic procedures, and classroom-based evaluation and reporting to parents. The major focus of the study, however, is an analysis of the 2000 Queensland Year 5 Aspects of Literacy and Numeracy Tests results, items and data sets.

The study involved five major steps, conducted between October 2001 and April 2002:

a) A review of literature on 'culture-fair' assessment, test bias and discrimination, and literature on assessment and testing of Indigenous children.

b) Discussions with representatives of testing authorities and education systems, and an analysis of existing documentation on tests.

c) Field visits to a sample of four schools to provide a broad range of assessment, evaluation and reporting practices used with Indigenous children.

d) Convening an expert panel of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, principals and researchers to undertake a content analysis of selected standardised tests; accompanied by statistical re-analysis of Indigenous student performance on specific items identified by the expert panel.

e) Statistical re-analysis of overall 2000 Year 5 test results by population, background and location.

Key findings

It will be noted that the following findings are linked with those from the *Standard Australian English and languages* project.

F1: There is some evidence that some specific test items discriminate against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on the basis of culture-specific background knowledge and linguistic background.

F2: That there is some evidence that the test administration and reporting formats discriminate against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on the basis of culture-specific background knowledge and linguistic background.

F3: That efforts to extend tests to cover more complex syllabus outcomes, constructivist problem-solving in numeracy, and other areas had generated a technical complexity, as well as complex issues of cognitive load and construct validity for the structure of tests.

F4. That there have been repeated documented calls for a critical re-evaluation of the cultural-specificity of the First Steps Developmental Continua as used on the Year 2 Diagnostic Net, and its affiliated support materials.

F5: Although there was some evidence in the small sample of good school-level practice, the research found that the actual school and classroom based practices for assessing students and reporting on their results tend to be, at the best, highly variable and school-specific, and at the worst, *ad hoc.*

F6: There was highly uneven evidence that system authorities had recognised that there might be problems with assessment bias and that system level attempts to adjust, accommodate or make more appropriate existing instrumentation and materials were sporadic, under-funded and had not had a major impact on practices in the field.

3.5 The *Preschooling experiences* project

Data cited indicates that in 2002, 36,029 children are enrolled in 771 Queensland government preschools or early education classes (EECs). 465 (just over 60%) of these preschools and EECs record Indigenous enrolments totalling 2,509, or 6.96% of total enrolments. The majority of Indigenous enrolments (1,378 or 55.72%) are in 75.59% of government preschools and EECs in the northern districts of Queensland. Simply interpreted, this means that four out of every five preschools in this part of Queensland have Indigenous children attending them.

Of the 227 non-government preschools and EECs, 72 have Indigenous children enrolled. (It should be noted, however, that there are discrepancies in enrolment and attendance data collected by systems.)

Key findings

Preschooling and early childhood education experiences determine children's readiness for schooling and strongly influence their attitudes towards engaging formal education as part of a lifelong learning process. It is for these reasons that education systems and independent centres must ensure that early childhood education programs generally, are of high quality – and the best that can be offered.

For the most part, early childhood educators are committed to their work with children, parents and communities. However, findings outlined below from this study (and those from the study relating to the sustainability of independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools) indicate that there are areas of existing service provision that require some attention.

F1: Data suggests that most centres attract good numbers of Indigenous children from their areas in the remote and community centres where the options are limited an the local community encourages participation in education. All centres indicate they are catering to the local community with only small numbers of children not attending. However, for urban and more populated areas where there are more options and many services trying to attract children to their centres and programs, it is difficult to gauge the proportion of Indigenous children (compared with the total number of Indigenous children residing these areas) who participate in preschooling and early childhood education programs.

F.2: Where preschools and schools and teachers have established links or partnerships with their local communities, programs are relevant to children's social and cultural backgrounds. However, more preschools and schools need to adopt this practice to ensure that families and community members participate in the education of their children; the whole child is catered for; and that learning is based on children's understandings.

F3: Some government school facilities need upgrading to adequately meet the physical and learning requirements of young children enrolled in preschool and early childhood education. (Independent kindergartens and preschools, for example, must meet basic standards set by the Department of Families in order to receive funding for operations and programs.)

F4: There is a need to raise the overall standard of effective early childhood practices in relation to Indigenous children through improving the quality of teachers' pre-service and in-service education. During interviews and discussions, it was suggested that teachers have opportunities to share good practice through:

- forums where government and non-government early childhood representatives can meet;
- formalised networking of government and non-government preschools and centres;
- visits to preschools and centres where good practice occurs; and
- the establishment of a central body to coordinate existing early childhood resource centres.

3.6 The *Sustainability of independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools* project

This project highlighted the effectiveness of Indigenous community involvement. With Indigenous management committees, programs are culturally appropriate, children's attendance is regular, and strong links are maintained with families and the community.

Key Findings

From information gathered through interviews and focus group sessions conducted with staff, parents and community members associated with sixteen independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools; officers of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training; Creche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland; and the Department of Families, Youth and Community Services, key findings are:

F.1: There is strong evidence to suggest that a whole-of-government and family approach to services is needed; particularly one that involves negotiation, consultation and collaboration directly between communities and kindergartens.

F.2: Policies and guidelines currently in existence are not inclusive of Indigenous protocols, cultures and lifestyles. Effective, appropriate policies and guidelines need to be urgently negotiated between key stakeholders and Indigenous communities to cater for independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools.

F.3: The transition for Indigenous children from early childhood centres/community kindergartens and preschools to local primary schools is largely ad hoc and lacking in process.

F.4: Current arrangements with respect to recurrent and capital funding to community kindergartens, administered by the Creche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland (acting as an agent for Education Queensland in consultancy and administrative) are not as effective as they could, or need to, be. Those interviewed considered that this is due to:

- The lack of effective and appropriate policies and guidelines that reflect Indigenous communities;
- The limited supply of consultancy support available;
- The lack of professional development available to staff; and
- The lack of financial incentives to attract quality staff to Creche and Kindergarten centres.

F.5: Currently, there is no provision for independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools to maintain, upgrade or service their existing buses. (Buses were allocated to these centres over ten years ago through one-off Commonwealth funding to enable Indigenous children to attend kindergartens and preschools. Day-to-day running of these buses now cost an average of $6,000 each per year.)

F.6: Independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools in urban, rural and remote locations – particularly those located in isolated areas – find it difficult to recruit and maintain quality early childhood trained teachers. Geographical isolation and the high cost of living in rural and remote areas, combined with the availability and high cost of rental accommodation; lack of assistance with travel and relocation costs; and lower salary rates for teachers (due to absence of a Senior Teacher classification) and relief teachers than those paid to teachers employed by the state education system. In addition, there is no continuation of superannuation between centres/services; no guaranteed redundancy payments or long service leave; and no access to professional development or networking days at local schools due to lack of pupil-free days.

F.7: Many of the independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools visited have shown commendable initiatives in creating culturally appropriate settings for Indigenous children by incorporating Indigenous content into curriculum; producing relevant curriculum resources; in some instances, introducing Indigenous language programs; and involving parents and community members in a range of centre activities. These initiatives are achieving and sustaining high levels of attendance and development of literacy, numeracy, social and emotional skills. However, in order to maintain and improve levels of achievement and remain up-to-date with current policies, strategic directions, curriculum, successful classroom practice, and cultural awareness as appropriate, staff require regular and ongoing access to professional development, coordinated by early education consultants employed through the Creche and Kindergarten Association.

F.8: Access to professional development and capacity building opportunities by staff and community members is limited. Current guidelines do not permit staff employed at affiliated centres to take pupil free days; no financial support is available to staff and community members to participate in professional development/capacity building programs; and centres' planning, programming or professional development sessions are not permitted during term time. Therefore, staff and committee members attend conferences in their own (holiday) time and often at their own expense.

F.9: Independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools are lacking in the finances, human and physical resources, to perform management tasks currently required of them. Administration demands and expectations placed on teaching staff and (voluntary) management committees are unreasonable, given that they are required to complete licensing agreements, annual audits, stock-takes, Commonwealth IESIP funding reports, Business Activity Statements, as well as attend today-to-day accounts, enrolment fees, and employees' wages. Parents have indicated that they '*want to get back to the decision-making aspect of centres along with the cultural involvement needed*', instead of being responsible for managing a business with high pressures and demands that are costing them valuable time as volunteers.

3.7 QIECB position papers and recommendations

Reports from all seven studies, including findings and recommendations from researchers, are currently being developed into QIECB position papers for presentation to both State and Commonwealth Ministers for Education.

4. CHALLENGES

4.1 QIECB position on schooling

The QIECB's position on schooling is that current state and national goals and objectives for Indigenous learners can only be achieved in a school environment where students' self-esteem is enhanced; where they are valued as individuals; where their backgrounds are recognised; where their cultures and home languages are accommodated; where they are inspired to become lifelong learners; where school principals and administrators possess effective leadership skills in order to establish effective school-community partnerships; where teachers are appropriately educated and adequately prepared to meet the needs of diverse student populations; and where curriculum is relevant and purposeful. This environment most successfully occurs when schools, and personnel within schools, engage with local communities through ongoing dialogue, negotiation and critical reflection of the underpinning cultural assumptions employed in approaching these issues.

This view is confirmed in the final report of the National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, delivered to the Prime Minister and the Commonwealth Parliament in December 2000. Under the heading of 'educating for the future', the report states:

> *A constant theme of Council's consultations has been that 'education is the key' to achieving reconciliation. By this, people imply three things. They seek education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in culturally sensitive ways to a point where they can participate as equals, with good jobs and economic security. They seek education of decision-makers and people who provide services so that they work through respectful partnerships and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Finally, they seek education of the wider community to understand the issues of education.*
>
> (Council for Reconciliation, 2000:53).

Some key findings from research projects relate to facilities, infrastructure, data collection, staffing and employment issues. These will be brought to the notice of education systems for planning and budgetary considerations. There are other findings, however, that have long term implications for Indigenous students' learning, as well as their career choices and social directions. These are findings concerning retention to Year 12 or its equivalent by Indigenous students, English language and literacy proficiency, testing and assessment, curriculum and pedagogical appropriateness, which relate to the values and cultural capital possessed by Indigenous students when they embark on their journey through formal education, and indeed remain with them during their lives. These differing values and worldviews create tensions for both Indigenous students and their teachers. The overall challenge, therefore, is how to ensure that all teachers are provided

with the tools to accurately gauge where Indigenous students are 'at', in order to meet their educational needs.

4.2 The issue of Values

> *For those nation states that have evolved historically, politically, socially and freely in what might be called the 'Western tradition', the yoking together of liberal democracy and economic development is not so problematic. Yet for nation states whose history, culture and social mores derive from other sources, Western democratic values are neither natural nor necessarily consistent with local values and cultures.'* (Kennedy, 2002:25)

Indigenous Australians, to varying degrees, have maintained major elements of their cultures and lifestyles (for example, interactions with the natural environment; connection to 'country' or place; strong extended family/kin relationships and obligations; the law of reciprocity), and view the cultural and linguistic differences between themselves and other Australians as expressions of identity to be maintained. Keeffe (1992) refers to the assertion of Indigenous identity as both 'resistance' and 'persistence' that began in response to early colonising practices.

Over a period of some decades, appropriately experienced educators have become aware that Indigenous worldviews and values differ from those of Australia's dominant culture: however, Indigenous values have neither been clearly defined nor accommodated within major Australian education statements, strategic directions, overall curriculum and pedagogy.

Although changes are currently taking place in education systems - in cooperation with Indigenous communities - to deliver programs relevant to Indigenous students and to support all educators and students in acknowledging the value of Indigenous cultures to Australian society, the challenges (posed by Buckskin) are:

- How can Indigenous Australian culture be employed as a means of strengthening education for Indigenous communities without confining the young members of these communities to the legacy of the past?
- How can Indigenous cultures be made the basis for the education of young Indigenous Australians, at the same time employing a curriculum and pedagogy that allows young Indigenous people to transcend it?

At the same time, however, a major tension exists. The current globalisation of capital, labour and communications (with English as the dominant language) is being received with some concern by people of non-Western cultures. Many countries have committed themselves to programs of civic education to prepare for citizenship of the new globalised society. According to Kennedy, *'A key issue in the development of such programs is the definition of the values base that should underpin them.'* He further asks, *'Is there a role for Western democratic values in non-Western countries, and how might these match with indigenous or local values to support local cultures threatened by*

globalisation? Or are the Western imagination and indigenous values necessarily mutually exclusive?'

4.3 Indigenous students' lack of dominant cultural capital

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students schooling presents both tension and challenge. They *'...come to formal education and training with little or none of the cultural capital that their non-Indigenous peers take for granted. Certainly, many Indigenous students bring with them rich cultural capital, but it is rarely of the sort valued by the formal educational system... this cultural competence has little currency in the systems of education... On the other hand, many Indigenous students are poor in their own Indigenous cultural capital and do not value their cultural background, often because of the break up Indigenous families and communities, the loss of Indigenous culture, the demise of many languages and the breakdown in the Elder teaching process.'* (Buckskin, 2002:160).

Schools, however, are in an important position in regard to easing students' tensions and guiding them through the challenges they face during their years of formal education. On one hand, schools (education generally) reflect and reproduce social values, lifestyles, etc: yet schools can also reinforce specific values and develop in students the knowledge and skills to contribute to social change and justice, hence the power of pedagogy and of curriculum. Keeffe writes of the *'...negative and positive force...* of curriculum as *...something which both works on and through people....its mode of operation* (viewed) *as both enabling and constraining.'* He adds that *'Only such a sense of power is capable of viewing cultural change from two perspectives, those of the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless.'* (1992:8)

In order to do this, however, educators must recognise that *'many Indigenous students find the cultural assumptions of formal education puzzling, frustrating and alienating'* (Buckskin, 2002:160): that formal education focuses on the individual rather than the Indigenous emphasis on the group or collective (family, clan, community), and that these notions, and an understanding of the power relationships in society, need to be acquired and accommodated by Indigenous students in order to achieve within mainstream education.

4.4 English language and literacy

Overall, Indigenous students consistently score lower levels of proficiency on the Years 3, 5 and 7 English literacy and numeracy tests than other Australian students. (Numeracy tests are included here because Indigenous educators consider the problem to be not so much the numeracy/mathematical concepts, rather the English language in which tests are written.) This is due not only to the context of test items and forms of English language used by Indigenous students in a range of locations (outlined in findings from the *Standard Australian English and languages* and *Accountability* studies), but also to values implicit in the language of tests. All languages relate to specific cultures, and as such, have culture-related values embedded within them. It is not uncommon to observe the different understandings of two people talking, when each of them is from a different

cultural, social or career background. There is a tension in such circumstances: real, or meaningful and effective, communication does not and cannot occur (without a great deal of explanation) because of the differing experience- and knowledge- bases of the individuals concerned.

These misunderstandings also occur frequently during attempted communication between Indigenous learners (as well as families and community members) and educators; and importantly, between educators and Indigenous learners, their families and community members.

The challenge for educators is how to acquire understandings of Indigenous (and relevant other) children's cultural and language backgrounds in order to effectively use these as bases upon which to develop children's skills within dominant culture and language settings, and for real communication to occur with Indigenous families and community members.

4.5 Teacher education

At a national conference in the year 2000, the previous Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, commented that:

> *...'too many people still look at Indigenous students in terms of the deficit model and as the most difficult students in terms of remediation. Too many people still do not regard racial bias in educational outcomes as a sign of the failure of the education and training system to respond appropriately.'*

These and other comments indicate that there is a need to revisit teacher education so that - if Indigenous students are expected to attend school, participate in school programs and achieve equitable outcomes – programs offered provide educators with opportunities to acquire relevant knowledge and skills for meeting the educational needs of Indigenous students. Acknowledgment must be given, however, to the exemplary practices of those teachers and administrators who currently are working successfully with Indigenous students, their families and communities as recorded in case studies from the QIECB research reports and the national *What works?* materials.

The two early childhood education (preschooling) studies indicate that programs are more appropriate for Indigenous children when they include relevant content, and when parents are involved in the preschools'/centres' activities. Further, after making the transition to school, children handle Year 1, start to 'get shaky' in Year 2, but by Year 3 'things start to go wrong'. This retrogression is evident in data from Years 3 and 5 literacy tests as reported in the studies of *Standard Australian English and languages* and *Accountability*. What 'goes wrong'? We can only assume that the larger classes do not permit an approach that focuses on individual children; that the whole child is no longer catered for; that parents and community members have less, if any, involvement in the school; and/or that curriculum is less meaningful to students.

In the report of the *Completion of Twelve Years of Schooling or its equivalent* study, researchers expressed concern about the relatively high incidence of suspensions and exclusions of Indigenous students. Again, questions need to be asked about why this is so; for example, to what extent are suspensions and exclusions of Indigenous students due to miscommunication between educators and students, as already discussed? The reasons are undoubtedly complex and include some – but not all - factors extrinsic to schools.

The study of *Community Capacity Building* found that successful partnership models had been established by schools where administrators had good networks, insight and the ability to effectively communicate with Indigenous students, their families and community members.

Teachers and education administrators must become knowledgeable on matters such as Indigenous values, lifestyles, cultures, languages and contemporary issues: they must also know protocols for interacting with Indigenous families and communities; particularly if 'real' education partnerships are to be achieved. Possession of this knowledge and accompanying skills should be prerequisites for educators of Indigenous students.

Most importantly, mindsets need to change – not only those of teachers, but within Australian society generally. This is the most difficult challenge of all.

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